

*SBT-AE-004. The Leech Gatherer. William Wordsworth Poem.
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The Leech-Gatherer. William Wordsworth Poem. Appreciation By P S Remesh Chandran

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William Wordsworth's poetry has no style because nature and life has no style. The perfect plainness of his poems gained him popularity. He mostly wrote about nature and man and is considered the world's greatest nature poet. The world was very late in recognizing his merit. However, glory found its way to his grave. The Leech-Gatherer, alternatively titled 'Resolution And Independence' is the universal symbol of eternal human labour.

A poet's perennial interest in man and nature.



01. A Portrait of William Wordsworth.

When Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Mary Shelley decided to author one horror creation each, Coleridge wrote The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner which terrorized even him and became an all-time classic in horror. Mary Shelley wrote the novel Frankenstein which still terrorizes the world by creating nightmares in the minds of whoever thinks of that abominable human being that rogue scientist assembled from several body parts.

Wordsworth, so soft in nature and inept at creating situations of terror, wrote The Stolen Boat which terrorized no one except perhaps him. Failing to

create horror situations remained a shame in his mind for many years which he wished to rectify by writing a poem with finer horror conceptions someday. The Leech-Gatherer was an addition to this sequel of horror tales by these three friend writers which fulfilled its mission by creating a new sophistication in horror. It is one of the immortal creations of Wordsworth and can be identified as such among the hundreds of inferior poems he created throughout his life. There has been a universal question raised in this world which we have never been able to answer yes or no: 'Will the world look after us and provide for us when we are old?' The Leech-Gatherer is Wordsworth's the answer to this ages-old question.

Appearance of exquisite nature pictures in poetry pages, after Edmund Spenser.



02. Dove Cottage in Grasmere. Once Home to Wordsworth.

The poem opens with presentation of a series of beautiful nature pictures, second only to Edmund Spenser's in his *The Faerie Queene*. After the heavy rain and storm of yester night, the Sun is rising calm and bright as if nothing had happened the day before. The atmosphere is such still and silent that the sweet sounds of birds singing in distant woods can be heard as distinctly as if they were very near. The voices of Stock-Dove, Magpie and Jay, mixed with the pleasant noise of waters flowing everywhere, fill the atmosphere.

All the Sun-loving creatures are out of doors, i.e., out of their dens and caves, and the simple grass is shining bright and fresh with rain drops adorning them. Unable to hide her mirth, the hare is running races on the moor in the morning air, like frivolous playful kitten. Wherever she touches her feet, tiny water particles rises up like mist from the splashy earth, glittering in the Sun, forming beautiful rainbow-glows about her tiny feet. The poet also can feel the very pulse-beat of Nature as those creatures as he is personally present there with sensitive eyes and ears, capturing the pressure and temperature of that atmosphere and bringing to us the freshness of those scenes intact.

A poet as light and happy as a lark.



03. Grasmere Village With The Dove Cottage.

He was then a morning-traveller upon that moor. He was as happy as a boy that he sometimes heard and sometimes heard not the roaring sounds of the great woods and waterfalls around him.' Now he has quite forgotten how sad he had been moments earlier, and would again be moments after. He has reached the peak of happiness if there is one, forgetting all his pangs and

past memories, and that sad useless melancholic mood common and so natural to man.

Premonitions of a lonely traveller on the moor.



04. Waterfall and Stone Hut where the Poet wrote poems

When we are happy, we begin to think that our happiness won't end. And when we are sad, we begin to feel anxious about whether our sadness won't end someday. We want our sadness to end immediately and happiness never to end. Happiness and sadness are but waves in a sea of thoughtfulness, receding to that same deep stillness. John Milton, while studying for M.A., had to write two long essays describing two entirely contrasting things for his vivo voce examination. He selected Day and Night which no other things have more contrast between, and decided to write these two essays as poetry. Therefore the world got two immortal poems. He selected the Italian title *L'Allegro* for Day which meant the mirthful man. And he selected the Latin title *Il Penseroso* for Night which meant the thoughtful man. The opposite of happiness is not sadness in his view. All the world's philosophers know contrast to happiness and mirth is not sadness but thoughtfulness. It is only natural for man to fall from the height of happiness to the depth of dejection,

and then to thoughtfulness. This happens to the poet also in that fine morning on the moor.

Clouds come thick into the serene mind of a poet.



05. 'He was a traveller then upon the moor.'

Fears and fancies come thick into the poet's mind, like clouds coming ominously into a serene sky. In the midst and presence of such blissful creatures as the warbling sky lark and the playful hare, he feels himself to be walking far away from the world and all earthly cares. His whole life he has lived in pleasant thoughts as if life's business were a summer dream. His poetry-writing career had not brought him enough to buy even his shoe-strings. Many mighty poets have returned to earth in their misery, suffering fleshly ills such as cold, pain and heavy labour. Would he too die the same way? Would solitude, distress, pain of heart, and poverty be awaiting him too, to accompany him to the grave? Is it not that the tragic career of all poets, as a rule, begins in gladness and ends in sadness and gloom? That marvelous Village-Milton that was Chatterton, who had walked in glory and in joy along his native mountain side following his plough, living the life of a farmer, had perished in poverty, though with pride. But why are these

ominous thoughts coming to him at this untoward moment? The goose-bumps springing up all through his body parked at that lonely and desolate moor told him that Nature is soon going to present him with some sign of divine warning to admonish him about the rarity and preciousness of Time. Then he saw it- the warning, placed there on the wild, for all the world to see.

The warning written on the lonely moor, beside a pool.



06. Sudden appearance of a ghost of a man here.

A very old man, perhaps the oldest man that ever wore grey hairs, appeared suddenly beside a pool in that wild- the oldest person the poet ever saw in this world. He never fitted in with those lonely wild surroundings. Such an extremely old man in such strangest of circumstances was odd and out of place. Nature startles man with her bizarre and striking spectacles. 'Sometimes huge stones can be seen lying couched on tree-less bald mountain tops, causing wonder to all who look at them.' One will begin to think whether or not they are gifted with an unnatural ability to walk up the mountain eminence and lie couching there, precariously balanced. Another equally tantalizing spectacle is at the sea shore, that of 'some huge sea-beast

crawled forth and reposing on some shelf of rock or sand to sun itself.' Such bizarre and out of place seemed the appearance and look of that old man in such strange surroundings. Some wild experience of disease or pain had caused his body to bend unnaturally double, making his feet and head come close together in life's pilgrimage. One will wonder how he can still make himself stand erect in that set up of a nature-tortured frame. He propped his body upon a long grey staff of shaven wood. 'Upon the margin of that pool, he stood there as motionless as a firm cloud that moveth not in the wind, and if it moves at all, moves all together.' It means the old man could not turn or shift his face or hand or leg without turning or shifting the whole body. Ease and flexibility of bones and muscles had totally vanished but still the old man was making his meager living through the hardest and most painful of works. It is life that is important, and it has to go on at any cost. That is not only desperation but determination also. Not anywhere else in world literature has the uncanny appearance of old age ever been pictured more graphically and movingly.

Will the world look after us when we are old?



07. Gardens landscaped by the poet in Rydal Mount.

The old man was stirring the pond with his staff and studying the muddy water. Wordsworth very much wished to ask the old man what his engagement and occupation was there, and why. He asked and the old man answered in an uncommon, lofty, decorated language that fitted only the ethereal and the out-of-the-world. He was simply catching leeches from the pool. Enduring many hardships on the way, he had come to this pool to gather leeches for food and for sale. He has resolved to be independent and self-reliant in his old age. He roamed from pool to pool and from moor to moor, gaining his legitimate living in this way. He 'gained an honest maintenance and got housing by chance or choice each day through God's help.'

Was it real, or a vision of admonition from eternity?



08. Pond on the moor which the poet frequented.

The old man's words burnt deep into the lazy poet's mind. He wondered whether he hadn't seen this person somewhere in his dreams. Yes, this is the Eternal Man of Time- Kaala Purusha in Sanskrit- walking through ages, 'sent from some far off region to strengthen the poet's mind by apt admonition.' The lonely place, the old man's shape and speech- all troubled him, and for a

while, he lost his senses. A shadow passed through the front of his eyes and a blanket of clouds moved away from his mind, letting in a ray of light. When he regained consciousness after moments, he was a completely changed and new man, like the wedding-guest in *The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner*. The poet resolved to think about the leech-gatherer on the lonely moor in future whenever his mind lost its strength. Thus the alternate title of the poem, *Resolution And Independence*, is appropriate. The element of horror in the poem owes its thanks to the poet's friend Coleridge. The plainness of the poem is derived from Burns. The genuine contribution of Wordsworth in the poem is the unique moral treatment of the Man and Nature theme.

Why should one catch leeches?



09. Marshes And Bogs: Breeding Grounds For Leeches.

Leeches were used to drain blood from human body as part of medical treatment. They attach themselves to human body or animal bodies like horses and cattle, suck blood, remain on the victim's body for nearly 20 minutes, swell themselves to full size and then disengage themselves and fall. After they have fallen, bleeding from the victim's body won't stop before sometimes 8 hours or more. A collector of leeches could lose large quantities of blood this way and could get infected with diseases from leeches. If leeches are killed or removed before sucking much blood, they would lose biological properties and could not then be used for blood-letting in medicine. Therefore catching leeches was certainly a painful, risky and harmful affair, unlike harvesting frog-legs for restaurants. Unless the

engaged person decided to sacrifice something in him, there was no question of collecting leeches for medicine. Only poor people and people with no other means for survival turned to leech gathering for a living- invariably helpless aged people. Doctors, especially surgeons, needed large quantities of leeches and naturally they could not get these themselves. Therefore this supporting occupation of leech-gathering came into being and existed till the passing of the nineteenth century when sophisticated blood-letting methods and equipments were invented. Leeches collected this way were small and inconspicuous to see till they drew blood to their fill and swelled up into enormous sizes. It indeed was horror to see them sucking up blood and swelling. Leech-gatherers had to enter ponds, lakes and rivers in marshes and bogs, expose their legs to attract leeches and bleed themselves. Over-capture and destruction of habitat caused dwindling in their numbers even in the 19th century and there is reference in Wordsworth's poem about this: 'One they could be seen everywhere but now they cannot be seen everywhere as before; I have had to travel far and wide to see them'.

Wordsworth's Lake District was famous for bogs and marshes and poor men could be seen collecting leeches everywhere. Life was hard in colonial England for the majority of people, in the midst of gained and looted riches arriving in ships at every port from distant colonies. We never suspect Wordsworth as a revolutionary poet like Shelley but the hint is there. The misery of these leech-gatherers might certainly have urged Wordsworth to write *The Leech Gatherer* to bring world's attention to the sad living conditions of these uncared-for poor people in England's hamlets and villages, like Shelley wrote *Song To The Men Of England* to bring world's attention to the miseries and predicament of the peasants and factory workers of England in the same century.

A special note from author: An appendix to this appreciation.



10. Beauty Spots Of Nature, Haunts Of Poets.

There is a jungle beauty spot with a broad, step-waterfall at Meenmatty in Nanniyode Village in the Trivandrum District of Kerala. Mighty mountains surround it. I was a regular visitor to this place where I would wash my clothes, bathe in the rushing stream and lie on the rocks. On the distant mountain folds can be seen often an old man coming down, appearing and disappearing according to the nip and dip in the terrain. Finally he would reach the river bank and take a dip beside me in the torrent. Unlike the other natives, we were the two who preferred bathing above the waterfall to rather than descending to the safety of the lower tranquil part of the river. We both liked taking the risk of being swept away down by a flash flood that may originate due to proximity to mountains. Then he would take his bait and catch one or two fishes for his dinner. Then he would rise, and taking the fishes, the firewood, two killed birds and a hare and grass bundles for his goats- all gathered from the mountains- walk down through the rocks towards his home. Whenever he appeared on the river bank in the evenings, a water crow, the blackest and the ugliest I ever saw, also appeared and sat beside him on a rock amid the stream, hoping for a fish from his catch which he invariably threw to it. I knew this old man was severe and strict to his children and wife and others and was hated by them, but his ragged and weather-beaten frame and his uncouth behavior was an attraction to me, a fascination. He, in my eyes, was a genuine unpolished creation of nature, independent and resolute in every way in his old age.

One day news came that he was bitten by a deadly snake in the mountains and was lying in critical stage in hospital in the city. Many times it was rumoured that he has gone, and that it was good for his family. The water crow sat there on the rock amid the torrent each day. It was the first time I prayed Lord Shiva to perform a miracle and do not withdraw this creation from the village too soon. The Lord, anyway, has an adornment of a magnificent snake coiled around his neck. After days of lying unconscious the man was brought back to life, to the disappointment of many. In the distant mountain folds his head can still be seen rising up and down as he comes down to the river carrying his catch. The water crow still sits there on the rock in the stream and gets its snacks.

Bloom Books Channel has a video of this poem.

A primitive prototype rendering of this song was made in a crude tape recorder decades earlier, in 1984. In 2014, a home made video of this song was released. In 2015, a third version with comparatively better audio was released. The next version, it's hoped, would be fully orchestrated. It's free for reuse, and anyone interested can develop and build on it, till it becomes a fine musical video production, to help our little learners, and their teachers.

You Tube Link: Will soon appear in Bloom Books Channel at
<https://www.youtube.com/user/bloombooks/videos> .

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06. Sudden Appearance Of A Ghost Of A Man Here By David Anstiss.
07. The Gardens Landscaped By The Poet In Rydal Mount PD By Cmyk.
08. Pond On The Moor Which The Poet Frequented By David Kitching.
09. Marshes And Bogs: Breeding Grounds For Leeches By Martin J. Heade.

10. Beauty Spots Of Nature By Ivan Shishkin.

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Meet the author: About the author and accessing his other literary works.



Editor of Sahyadri Books & Bloom Books, Trivandrum. Author of several books in English and in Malayalam. And also author of 'Swan, The Intelligent Picture Book'. Edits and owns Bloom Books Channel. Born and brought up in Nanniyode, a little village in the Sahya Mountain Valley in Kerala. Father British Council-trained English Teacher and mother university-educated. Matriculation with High First Class, Pre Degree studies in Science with National Merit Scholarship, discontinued Diploma Studies in Electronics and entered politics. Unmarried and single.

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31st Mar 2011 (<#>)

I have relished your experiences appended as comments equally I did with the main page. Wordsworth is my guide and philosopher poet.



[PSRemeshChandra](#)

1st Dec 2011 (<#>)

When we view from the distance of years, we can see that that genre of poets like Wordsworth who handled poetical themes as easily, lightly and efficiently as a swallow flits through the air or a fish swishes through the water has totally disappeared from the world. The only solace for us is the fact that they have left a tremendous volume of work for the coming generations to read and enjoy. Had they all decided to be scant in verse like Thomas Gray did, we would have been left with the misfortune of reading every single line written by every modern day poet repeatedly.



WILLIAMSJI MAVELI

9th Apr 2014 (<#>)

Very useful and interesting literary write, Regards WILLIAMSJI MAVELI.



[PSRemeshChandra](#)

17th Apr 2014 (<#>)

It was only that this poem by William Wordsworth was very interesting to me and so, I used it. Thank you William JI Maveli for going through this article and posting a comment.

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